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Bishop Bedell's Sermon.

THE

Trusteeship of the Gospel.

THE

Trusteeship of the Gospel.

AN

ORDINATION SERMON

BY THE

RT. REV. GREGORY THURSTON BEDELL, D. D.

Assistant Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Ohio,

PREACHED

In All Saints' Church, Portsmouth, Ohio, at an Ordination of four Presbyters and three Deacons, held by the Bishop of the Diocese, Sunday, June 6th, 1869.

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To the

Rt. Rev. G. T. Bedell, D. D.

Assistant Bishop of the Diocese of Ohio.

Rt. Rev. and Dear Sir:

Having listened with great interest and profit to your sermon on the Christian Ministry, and believing its publication would be timely and useful, we unite in requesting a copy for publication.

Portsmouth, O., June 6, 1869.

(Signed by)

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My Dear Bishop:

I earnestly hope you will accede to the request made to you by the clergy who heard your most appropriate sermon, at Portsmouth, on the Sunday after the Convention, that you will furnish it for publication. They do not estimate it too highly.

Yours, affectionately,

CHAS. P. McILVAINE.

Right Rev. G. T. Bedell, D. D.

ORDINATION SERMON.

The Trusteeship of the Gospel.

"*As we were allowed of God to be put in trust with the gospel, even so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God, which trieth our hearts.*"—I Thess. ii: 4.

THE apostle has seized upon a significant representation of ministerial functions. He speaks of himself as trustee. He is a trustee for God to men; acting in God's behalf for the benefit of His redeemed children.

The apostle stands before us, conscious of the solemnity of his trust; conscious, also, of the integrity of his purpose. He realizes the privilege of ministering the gospel. He recognizes his responsibility on either side; to God the giver, and to man the recipient. He sees clearly the relations of this trust. With refreshing directness, he states the principles on which it is to be administered. And so there lie, enfolded in this scripture, the first elements of the ministerial function. Let us unwrap the text, and, by Divine blessing, discover the aptness of its teaching. We have:

I. The nature of the trust.

II. The appointment and relations of the trustee.

III. The principles which guide a faithful discharge of the trusteeship.

1. The nature of the trust. "As we were allowed of God to be put *in trust of the gospel*, so we speak." There is no mistaking the simplicity with which the apostle presents this point. The matter in trust is the *gospel*—the glorious gospel of the blessed God! That which makes a burdened sinner leap for joy; that which tunes again a broken heart; that which satisfies a penitent believer's soul, giving songs for sighing, hope for fear, and changes the restlessness of unforgiven sin into the perpetual peace of reconciliation with God, and of sense of adoption into heavenly sonship. There is only one saying, "That faithful saying and worthy of all acceptation;" there is only one truth, in the universe of all true things, which can thus bear "glad tidings" to a soul at every stage of spiritual experience; one truth which is life-giving at all times and to all who embrace it. That truth is, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." That this is the gospel, witness, that John, the forerunner, announced it in the terms, "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world." The Saviour himself gave the key note of it in those memorable words, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have

eternal life." When apostles became capable of reading this truth clearly, by the light which streamed on it from the cross, they put it in the form, "He hath made him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."

All of these are harmonies upon that one tone, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners;" that one old tone, which sounds out of the depths of eternity past, when we hear of "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world;" which angels strung their melody upon, when sweeter strains, than ever again ravished human ear, broke in on the simple piping of the shepherd's reeds, with, "I bring you glad tidings of great joy, for unto you is born a Saviour;" that one old tone, which, in an eternity to come, shall waken the echoes of the heavenly temple, when angels shall listen in silent ravishment whilst saints are singing, "Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood;" "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing." That theme of earth and heaven, of sinner repenting and saint rejoicing, of eternity past and eternity to come, the tenor, substance, sum of revelation; that theme, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"—is the gospel. And the gospel forms this *Trust*.

But you will notice, the gospel is not salvation. It is merely the announcement of it. The gospel is not

that which saves, but simply a message concerning that which saves. It is a saying, a declaration. And therefore, as ministers of the gospel, we are put in trust with nothing but *news:* good news, "glad tidings;" but only a message of news concerning that which God has done for our salvation.

Consequently, some questions much vexed in the church are hereby put at rest. For example: It is a grievous error to say, as some have done, that part of the function of a minister of Christ—chief part—is to offer a sacrifice for the sins of the people, either in the mass, or in the eucharist. A sacrifice forms no part of the matter of our trust. The gospel is not a sacrifice, is not an atonement, is not Christ crucified; but is simply tidings of a sacrifice—a sacrifice that has been offered —of an atonement finished—of a Christ who has been crucified. Let the point be very distinctly before your minds. It may solve more than one future doubt. The ministry is not entrusted, in any respect, with that which saves; but only with a message concerning it. We are not trustees of salvation, but trustees of the gospel.

In like manner, they err, who affirm that the grace of God has been committed to the ministry, to be dispensed by them, either with or without conditions, by sacraments, ordinances, absolutions, or in any other way. The gospel is a message concerning the grace of God, but it is not the grace. And consequently, as

our trust covers only the gospel, it extends simply to the *declaration* of God's grace in Christ Jesus. We can not touch the grace itself, either to give or withhold. God, the Holy Spirit, mercifully holds the bestowal of grace within his own power. Keep this truth in mind. It will help you to understand the meaning and value of sacraments and absolutions. Sacraments are methods of delivering our message. They address the mind and heart through the eye, whilst our words reach the ear. They confirm the message. But we have no control over the grace which they represent. We announce God's merciful purpose. If grace reaches the heart through our message, God be praised! But we have no power to stamp grace upon an infant's heart by signing its forehead with the cross, nor to place grace in the soul of an adult by laying consecrated bread upon his tongue, nor to force grace upon his acceptance through the power of words, however skillfully arranged. We are not trustees of grace, but only of the gospel of grace.

And so they err, who suppose that it is a minister's duty to reconcile all apparent difficulties in scripture, or to harmonize all apparently discordant doctrines. Those ministers greatly err who attempt to make their preaching more definite than God's word, who attempt to explain what God has purposely left unexplained, or who attempt to cover the mysteries of scripture, by doctrines of philosophical speculation and necessities of

human systems. The matter of our trust is the message as revealed and stated in the Bible. The Bible is our text-book. Whatever we find there, it is our duty to preach; for the limits of the message are only, "Thus saith the Lord." We are not to select between truths, except as to the time of presenting them. We are to proclaim the message just as we find it—thus, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." "Being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." "Faith without works is dead, being alone." "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God which worketh in you, both to will and to do of his good pleasure." "He that believeth and is baptized, shall be saved: he that believeth not shall be damned." We are to hide nothing which belongs to the gospel, God's grace, man's inability. God's sovereignty, man's free will. God's infinite mercy, man's exposure to the endless misery of everlasting banishment from God's presence. We may show, as we can, that these truths are all reconcilable in the gospel. But we are not to hide any, because we fear that men will pervert or misinterpret.

The trust, then, is simply a message from God to men; a message concerning a salvation which has been completed by Christ Jesus. But that message embraces every thing necessary for a sinner to know in order to salvation. It is not one truth; but a central truth, around

which all truths revolve. The message concerns man's fallen condition, his absolute ruin of nature by sin, his actual transgression and exposure to eternal condemnation. It is full of the love of God; the eternal purpose of the triune Jehovah to make this earth the theatre of the wonders of redemption; the everlasting love, which gave His only begotten Son; the responsive love, which, in the Person of that Son, took this poor human nature into union with His own Divinity, and so suffered, and died, and rose, and ascended, and reigns, and intercedes, and saves; the completing love, which, in the Person of the Holy Ghost, dwells here on earth, representing Christ, administering salvation, pleading with the impenitent, giving more grace to the humble, imparting faith, strengthening the believer, enabling every follower of Jesus to grow into His likeness, using sermons, sacraments, ordinances, providences, every means, to purify and sanctify Christ's people, and create a people for Christ, who shall be presented at last as one church, without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing. This message covers the law of God, with its sanctions. It covers the rules of personal obedience, as well as the tidings of Christ's justifying obedience. It covers the announcement of a terrible retribution to those who choose to neglect the great salvation. It opens the gates of Paradise to all who love the Lord, and abide in him by living faith.

The trust is large enough to call forth every power

of the human minister—although, negatively, it is not salvation; and, positively, it is only news and a message.

2d. The appointment and relations of the trustee. "*Allowed of God* to be put in trust with the gospel," said the apostle. It is evident that so divine a trust, can be ministered only on divine appointment. God commits his message of reconciliation, not to men who send themselves to preach it, but to men whom He calls. The apostle has employed a remarkably strong expression in the text. The word translated "allowed," means, allowed after thorough examination, and sifting both of character and credentials. It is the term used by the Greeks to signify an examination for a magistracy, and its successful termination in the acceptance of the candidate.

In this case, the examination is made by the Almighty, heart-searching God! In presence of that scrutiny, our human tests of fitness become very insignificant: important to us, inasmuch as they guard the church; important to the church, inasmuch as they certify the qualities of those who minister. But the effectual scrutiny is made by the Lord himself. It is carried on silently, in the secret chambers of the heart of one of whom the Lord is fitting for his ministry. Long years go by; each crowded with temptation and trial, with tests of character and searchings of principle. There are struggles with sin, struggles with the fascinations of the world, struggles with indisposition toward sacrifices

and self-denials. There are graces to be cultivated. There are providences to be endured. There is the science of heavenly things to be mastered. But, all the while, there is a growing conviction in this soul that God is calling it to the ministry. There is a deepening satisfaction in contemplating the approaching mission. There is a strengthening purpose to give life, and talents, and energy, to this work for God. It increases in attractiveness, as we draw nearer to it. At last, with all humility, with consciousness of insufficiency in one's self, yet with irrepressible certainty that we are doing God's will, it shapes itself into the "Woe is me if I preach not the gospel." And so the divine examination has its result. God has called that one. He has been judged worthy of God, to be "put in trust with the gospel."

But how shall this judgment of God, thus impressed upon individual consciousness, become certified to the world to which he is to minister? His own impression can be evidence only to himself. He must also have some visible commission. The power of bestowing such commission must be committed to the church itself, unless, indeed, we were to expect that God would work a miracle in each particular case of sending out a minister, certifying thereby his ministerial authority. The Bishops, by the help of the Presbytery, therefore, bestow an official certificate of a divine trusteeship. They may err, for no human judgment is infallible; but

they are not likely to err, if, in the first place, they look for evidences of the divine call, and send forth, with official sanction, only those men, in whose hearts the divine mission is working imperatively to compel them to preach the gospel.

The moment such a man receives the commission from those whom God has appointed in His church to bestow it, he becomes, in all respects, a trustee for God. He has the inward call. He has the outward testimony to intellectual fitness and religious character. He has official authority. In all respects, thenceforth, he is to be regarded by the people as a trustee of the gospel. And into his own soul should sink an impression of the holiness, the nobleness, the dignity, the preciousness, the responsibility, and the glorious privileges of this office.

The duties of this trusteeship vary with degrees of ministry; but the nature of the trust is the same within all degrees. It is to declare God's message of salvation. Responsibility is higher in the higher office of the presbyter, because, then, being permitted to enter upon pastoral care, he comes into immediate contact with individual souls of his flock. But a deacon's responsibility lies in the same line. A deacon's duty is to deliver the message of salvation by prayers, by baptisms, by aiding a pastor's labors, and especially by that primitive, and precious ministry to the poor and suffering, which is peculiarly his own. They thus

represent Christ's gospel to the eye, by symbols, or by deeds of loving charity; and as they administer the charity of Christ's people, they press home upon the heart the loving grace of Christ himself, in hours when the heart is most tender through suffering; pressing Christ's love then by private counsels and prayers of brotherly sympathy.

The relations of this trusteeship of the gospel are, directly, on one side, to God who appoints the trustee, and on the other to the souls to whom God sends him. "Allowed *of God* to be put in trust." He is a trustee, acting in behalf of the Author of salvation. What humility should he feel! What lowliness of mind, what self-distrust, what reliance upon the promises, what leaning upon God! Surely there can be no place for pride, vain-glory, assumption of dignity and authority, arrogance, self-sufficiency, within the bounds of this idea—that a sinner, saved by grace, is made trustee of the gospel, for saving other sinners. On the other hand, he is entrusted with messages of God's mercy for God's children. He is to "provide for, feed," clothe, educate the Saviour's household. He is to see that none be led astray of the devil or the world. He is to recover those who have been taken captive of sin. He is to comfort the afflicted, to bring back the wanderer, to lead penitent souls to the cross, to warn, and rebuke, and chasten those who are obstinate in sin. What tenderness of spirit is demanded, what discretion in deal-

ing, what discrimination in judgment, what fidelity to God, and truth, and the souls of his people! All the susceptibilities of the human heart are called into action, whilst the divinely-appointed ambassador for Christ, remembering first his responsibility to God, administers the message so as not to break the bruised reed, and yet not to deceive with hopes of peace when an unhumbled sinner has no right to peace; to persuade men, whilst not hiding the terrors of the law; to mingle his sense of common infirmities with a sense of official responsibility; to be the man and the brother, whilst administering the trust for God. This relation toward the flock of Christ is intensely human. It is difficult and delicate; but charged with the choicest human satisfactions, whenever fidelity on one side is met with confidence on the other, and mutual love consecrates the bond between the trustee of God, and the souls for whom he ministers.

3. We could not reach our third point, in this development of the text, without exhibiting, in some degree, the method and *principles* which are to guide the execution of this trust. But, not to resume points over which we have passed, I direct your attention to a peculiarity in the mode of discharging this trusteeship, which necessarily follows from the nature of the trust.

Since the trust is a saying, we can discharge it only by *preaching*. For this saying of God is to be proposed for human belief. In no way can the heart lay

hold of a promise, except by faith. We can not see, or touch, a promise. You can not reach it by signs or symbols. We must deal with it only by believing or by disbelieving. There is no mystery in the declaration, that "we are justified by faith only." It is a necessity of the case. Pardon of sin, reconciliation with God, eternal life, are the substance of a *promise*. All that we can enjoy of them, for the present, is the promise. Consequently, the only possible mode of enjoying the blessing of Christ's religion, is by believing his word of mercy; believing his promise.

A minister of Christ stands, then, in a position of tremendous responsibility, for he holds the avenue by which the gospel approaches a soul. Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the proclamation of the word. How weighty, then, how earnest, how urgent, will his words be! He ought to ply every art to frame language which will most surely win access to the soul. Sympathy will open the widest door. Appeals sink deepest when they flow out from the heart of a minister, who has himself evidently experienced what he teaches, and whose emotions are kindled with the hope of drawing others to a Saviour, whose love he has found most precious. Faith responds to faith. A burdened sinner is drawn to a loving Saviour, by the certainty that he who is speaking for Christ, has become familiar with the path that leads to the cross. And a child of God puts his hand, most confidingly, within the hand

of that teacher whose own experience of religion has evidently been both true and satisfying.

We have thus reached the *principles* upon which this trust—this preaching of the gospel—is to be discharged. The minister must have perfect honesty, absolute integrity, entire security, fearlessness in respect to men, conscientiousness before God. "So we speak," said the apostle, "not as fearing men, but God, which trieth our hearts." A constant recollection of our two-fold relation, will enable us to measure the proportions of this truth. We speak in behalf of God, in discharging a trust which he has given us for our fellow-men. Our sole responsibility is to Him, and to Him in all particulars, for the truth of our message, the earnestness with which we press it, the motives which underlie our ministration, and the manner in which we discharge it. To Him we shall answer. Before Him we must account for every soul within the bounds of our pastoral care. Well may we tremble, if the blood of any soul shall rest upon our skirts. Glorious will be the crown, which his own hand shall bestow, if, in that day we can present to God any souls saved through our trusteeship. But fear of men, we should have none. Their frown, or their smiles, should not vary our message a semi-tone, from its simplicity and truth. We are trustees of the gospel for their benefit. Called of God, taught of God, commissioned of God, judged worthy by Him to be put in

this trust, our fidelity to him, to it, and to them, are supposed to be beyond the reach of mere worldly motives, can not be touched by ambition, can not be silenced by the displeasure of men who dislike God's truths. There is a wholesome regard for rightly formed human opinion, which a minister should cherish. His conscientious fearlessness should not be suffered to become independence of men's opinions. A man of God may wander entirely out of the sphere of his influence, by separating himself from the sympathies of the social circle in which he moves. And the opinions of wise and good men around him may often keep him from straying, as they will always strengthen and uphold his necessary denunciations of sin, and his fearless proclamations of truth. But when public opinion and God's truth stand opposite, the minister of Christ knows only one obligation. He is put in trust of the gospel, and that gospel he must speak fully and fearlessly, though ignorant men sneer, and wicked men deride, and although chains and prison or the stake await his utterance.

There is another view of it. We are exercising this trust for the kindest, and gentlest, and most gracious of masters. Our considerate Savior, who has called us to the work, understands whereof we are made. He expects of us no more than we can do. He asks of us no more than he will give strength to execute. He knows that the vessel is earthen; that it can not bear

all trials, nor endure all shocks. He is watching. He is with us. With a simple, trusting patience we labor on, committing humbly and confidently to Him to fix the place of our ministry, to surround it with such circumstances as will best forward its purpose, to sustain us in its faithful discharge, and to secure its success.

There is one other thought. We need not be solicitous about results. We labor for Christ. We preach for his glory. Our desire is to be the means of saving souls. But beyond that, our first, highest, most pressing object is to glorify Christ. We gain our point by being faithful to him. Ours is labor; results are His. But precious labor it is; labor that ever brings its own reward, whilst we are feeling the benediction of that loving Christ, and whilst every work of our hands testifies, "Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love Thee."

ADDRESS TO THE CANDIDATES.

My Brethren—who are now to be ordained:

Approaching this trust, I would have you feel not only its solemnity and responsibilities, but its privileges, its preciousness, the inward satisfactions and delights, which more than compensate for all its burdens.

I speak to you all: for the exigencies of the work will call at once upon the deacons to enter on that labor which belongs appropriately to the higher office; and you, dear brethren, who have already been pastors of the flock, have experienced that blessedness of the pastoral office to which I now refer.

You are to be put in trust with the gospel. In the most intimate of all relations, in the intercommunion of sympathizing souls, you are to take of the things of Christ, and show them unto those who shall be waiting to receive from your lips the consolations which cluster round the cross. O! the joy when you see the first beaming of the sun of righteousness upon the darkness of a soul which has been as if in midnight. When into the chaos of a deep sense of sin and ruin, and of fear

and anticipated wrath, there leaps, by the word of your message, a first thought that there is mercy in God, through the blood-shedding of his dear Son! When around that central truth of infinite love, the elements begin to shape themselves into an orderly and beautiful new creation, and all that is glad and excellent in godly living begins to spring into vigorous being to adorn that new-born soul! What joy it is to point to stable hopes, when worldly disasters and earth-born troubles are shaking a soul! When the devil brings his enginery of temptation to bear upon a soul, and swarms of doubts rise, and spiritual fears disturb, O then! to show the rock, and to help that poor distressed spirit to find there a foundation that stands sure! When affliction draws a cloud over the heart, and faith, sorely tried by sorrows, can not easily trace the loving countenance, because of the deep shadow of the hand that holds the rod, what joy it is to get that soul away to Calvary, and by the light that is always flashing from the cross, to show that a reconciled Father never is far off from a soul whom he chastens in love. And when the clouds deepen, at sunset, over the river that must be passed, O! what joy it is to speak of the Lamb that sitteth on the throne—"The Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world"—"whose presence sheds eternal day on those prepared to meet him;" and, as you speak, to see the eye of faith kindle even in death, the clouds become all radiant, the mists steal away from the river, and a

loving Lord, all glorious in His redeeming might, stands waiting on the further bank! The soul sees Him, and hastens to be gone. You almost seem to see Him yourself. And in the moment of farewell, there come across, the words of the gracious welcome: "Well done, good and faithful servant!" and you know that the Lord means it for yourself, as well as for the redeemed one, whom you guided surely past the cross, and safely into heaven.

There is no joy on earth to be compared to that of a faithful pastor, who knows "Christ crucified," and how to use that truth for the comfort and support of His people.

And then; this *trusteeship* brings yourself so near to Christ and to the Holy Spirit! A trustee is always in most intimate communion with those for whom he exercises his trust. As for all believers, so for you especially, there is access to the Lord whose message you minister; and to that Holy Ghost who permits, authorizes, and strengthens you to imitate his office, and work with Him, whilst you take of the things of Christ and show them unto men. Of all our privileges this is chief: nearness of access, intimacy of fellowship. Use it, dear brethren! Use it freely. Live within the precious influences of Jesus' presence. Drink deeply into the spirit of His love. Realize the grace and power of the Holy Ghost. Place all your dependence there. That is the unction you need. A heart full of

devotion to Christ, whom you feel has bought you with His blood, and words taught by the spirit and followed by His power. These will render the exercise of your trusteeship an ever present joy.

May the God of all grace fill you with that joy, through Jesus Christ our Lord!

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